

Meyers, Allison, *Review, Pastedgram*, September 30, 2011

REVIEW

Try to imagine Clement Greenberg and a seventy-year old Texas handyman discussing a work of art; they might begin conjuring words like hearty abstraction, bold color, weathered wood and nostalgia. This is precisely the audience Colby Bird imagined for himself in *Dust Breeds Contempt* at Lora Reynolds Gallery. Formerly driven by hip-hop culture and the masculine minimal, Bird is now turning a critical eye to the practice of making objects. The outcome is a group of stunning abstract sculptures that engage the viewer on a material level.

Most of Bird's sculptures rely on the rectangle and square but avoid minimalism's manufactured aesthetic. The works instead seem to be lovingly assembled by hand with materials from a Texas ranch house or antique shop. Given Bird's childhood in Texas, it's tempting to read this show as biographical: modernist sensibilities combined with a Texas materiality.



Colby Bird, *Shelf with Fruit*, 2011; wood, wood stain, dust, paint, financial times and fruit; 60 x 24 x 3 inches; courtesy Lora Reynolds Gallery.

A long and hefty wooden beam divides the gallery's main room, bearing a striking resemblance to a hitching post for horses. The beam supports four individual sculptures composed of twisted and reconfigured chair parts in wood and metal; these could easily pass for Brancusi abstractions of Duchamp readymades. *Cord*, a vortex of weathered white 2x4s, is literally dizzying as each step around it elicits a wildly different visual experience. Leaning against a wall in the main room, a brightly painted stack of flattened cardboard boxes gives the show a burst of color and saves it from being chromatically dull.

If we could leave it at that, the show would be a wonderfully visual and eloquent meditation on objecthood and materiality. Unfortunately, Bird stretches his work further to include a conceptual statement on ownership and the creative life of an artwork. In *33*, viewers can pick up and hold a small granite block or request that the gallery attendant change it out for a wooden cylinder or other stone. A frame and table installation displays eight different photographs that change out daily or on request. The colorful stack of cardboard boxes slowly droops and expands without interference; in other sculptures, such as *Shelf with Fruit*, the gallery attendant must change out a piece of fruit before it rots and disrupts the shelf that leans on it.



Colby Bird, *33* (detail), 2011; wood, granite, marble, rubber and dust; 50 x 13 x 8 inches; courtesy Lora Reynolds Gallery.

As the press release has it, this interchangeability “disallows any definitive formal or conceptual solutions” and puts creative power in the hands of the gallery, the viewer, or the “eventual owner.” Yet, while the

component pieces surely make the works more dynamic, there’s still a definitive list. This authored set of variations does little more than heave an extra breath into the body of work. Since viewers can’t change the components themselves, the gallery attendant must mediate the entire experience.

This is a crucial point. Bird does not wholly communicate through the simple act of looking. Instead, *Dust Breeds Contempt* is tuned more to the gallery/museum system and the experience of the eventual owner, who would have the opportunity to fiddle with things at leisure. The viewer outside of this system can only approach Bird’s conceptual strategies from the sidelines. Though there’s nothing wrong with making work for the gallery system, the simple sculptural eloquence of the show provides for a far more engaging experience. His work could benefit from a little more of this unmediated honesty. After all, modernist abstraction and the Texas sensibility largely have one quality in common: both aim to say the complex things simply.